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Educator Experiences in the Reshaping of Schools During Challenging Times: "The New normal or Is It?"

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Educator Experiences in the Reshaping of Schools During Challenging Times: “The New Normal or Is It?”

As leaders, we have begun to normalize things that happened in the pandemic like, ‘It’s normal, it’s normal. But it’s not normal.’ Educational reform initiatives prior to this health crisis have called for substantial change, and the current COVID-19 global health pandemic even further compounds this need. Although many districts and schools transitioned to teaching online, shifted to hybrid, and/or went fully online, these modes have presented and continue to present challenges. Although the transition to online education was universal, and all efforts were made to provide resources and respond positively to the situation, educators would be remiss if they did not consider the numerous challenges and often opportunities that impacted teaching and learning. Educators were tasked with rethinking and, in turn, reshaping the nature and degree of change necessary to support school leaders, teachers, support personnel, students, and their families (Kaden, 2020). These supports came in the form of implementing new evidence-based practices to navigate both the academic and non-academic factors of teaching and learning in varied environments.

With teachers’ needs being at the forefront of the pandemic in terms of support demanded, school leaders within a crisis must make careful decisions about how to best serve their communities. The nature of the crisis necessitates leaders like principals and professional school counselors to step forward to act as a trustworthy, credible voice for their community to keep the positive school climate at the forefront of what they do to educate students (Netolicky, 2020). With an estimated 80% of school-aged children worldwide suddenly out of school during the pandemic, the impact on children’s education and general mental health and well-being has been a major concern for school leaders (Dayal & Tiko, 2020). Furthermore, with a call for emotional support needed by educators in the field, delving into the lived experiences of those who engaged in teaching and learning at this unique time is pivotal in addressing health and mental well-being (Alvarez, 2020). To best support teaching and learning, educators must go beyond the technical and academic aspects of teaching and learning. There is a need to address the non-academic emotional dimensions of those doing the teaching by continuing to address the growth of the whole teacher (Crawford et al., 2021). The need to address the whole child is even more critical during a health emergency for all educators who are on the front lines and need to pivot in the face of challenge. Referring to this crisis as our “new norm,” the researchers specifically desired to better understand the experiences of school leaders and professional school counselors. Being in a leadership role they are the most important player in helping teachers and students transition from traditional classroom experiences to online learning. In the face of unavoidable obstacles, the new norm needed to be navigated as new health crisis scenarios played out and we as educators learning to navigate a different way of teaching and learning.

The researchers agree that our community will rise to the challenge, engage in dialogue, and form authentic partnerships across disciplinary boundaries, and innovate and create in ways that improve the lives of educators and students (DeMatthews et al., 2020). We also concur with DeMatthews et al. (2020) that we need to remain steadfast and committed to our work, to implement strategies that can and will make a difference in our schools and communities to address this new norm. It is our belief is that this research around educator experiences during a crisis will aid in working collaboratively with public health and educational organizations to

make an impact and generate innovative ideas that make the world a better place for educators, students, their families, and community stakeholders.

Thus, the purpose of this research is to help identify the experiences of school leaders and professional school counselors during the pandemic. Thus, the following research question guided this study: What have been school leaders' and professional school counselors' professional and emotional experiences around working with teachers and student well-being during this global health pandemic? Our research is intended to examine the thoughts and feelings associated with working in leadership roles during this pandemic, with both school leaders and professional school counselors, whom the researchers argue both serve in the most critical leadership roles within the school building.

Review of the Literature

Self-Efficacy through a Leadership Lens

Since the start of the health pandemic, researchers have attempted to uncover the everyday experiences and challenges educators have faced throughout the COVID-19 global health pandemic and continue to face today. Many educators have noted varying degrees of preparedness for this new norm, impacting both positively and negatively, their own self-efficacy around appropriately handling a crisis. Self-efficacy is the theoretical lens that drove this research and can be defined as one's belief in their ability to "coordinate and orchestrate skills and abilities in changing and challenging situations" (Money, 2020, p. 43). This study assessed the self-efficacy of school leaders and found that educators felt a high sense of self-efficacy during the pandemic in their efforts to maintain a positive learning environment for students. However, a large majority of the school leaders noted low self-efficacy in the ability to raise student achievement, identifying limited access to technological resources as a challenge. Furthermore, 50% of the participants believed they would lack the ability to manage, change, or shape operational policies during a pandemic, allowing for additional barriers to student growth and well-being. It is these findings that support the theoretical lens of self-efficacy to better understand school leaders and professional school counselors' experiences in their new norm amidst a global health pandemic.

Leading in a Global Health Pandemic

School leaders noted that they were confident in their preparedness to best serve students, staff, and parents during the pandemic; however, they felt a lack of resources due to student inequities complicated the experience (Varela & Fedynich, 2020). Furthermore, there was a need to continue effective school leadership under atypical circumstances. Additionally, of the school leaders surveyed, 79% of respondents agreed that they were highly prepared and confident in delivering high-quality instruction virtually. However, resource availability was limited, with 63% of school leader respondents reporting that their district was not prepared with the appropriate resources needed to continue high-quality instruction remotely. In the face of these challenges, teachers, students, and parents looked to school leadership efforts for guidance and support. The role of school leadership became increasingly important in building and maintaining a supportive community through relationships with the staff, students, and families (Fornaro et al., 2021).

In times of crisis, leaders often do not have any more information than anyone else does and this lack of knowledge induced by pandemic uncertainty was uncomfortable and problematic

for all constituents (Ahlström et al., 2020). In times of crisis, the roles and responsibilities of school leadership are magnified and highly scrutinized (Direen, 2017). School leaders who handle crisis events hold various critical attributes, including the:

Ability to cope with ambiguity; a strong capacity to think laterally; a willingness to question events in new and insightful ways; a preparedness to respond flexibly and quickly, and to change direction rapidly if required; an ability to work with and through people to achieve critical outcomes; the tenacity to persevere when all seems to be lost; and a willingness to take necessary risks and to break ‘the rules’ when necessary. (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021, p. 63)

Counseling in a Global Health Pandemic

Decreasing mental health inequity is a problem that predates the pandemic (Hawrilenko et al., 2021). Professional school counselors are tasked with leading the efforts to improve mental health in schools by providing discussions to increase awareness and provide empathy to attain a positive school climate (Pincus et al., 2020). While nothing has prepared educators for this pandemic, the issues resulting from the pandemic will have lasting effects as schools adjust to the new norm. Professional school counselors provide various counseling theories they can apply in a school crisis to aid those who have been exposed to crisis situations, by providing coping and prevention strategies.

School counselors can provide professional development to staff about trauma-informed care, crisis awareness, and crisis coping strategies (Pincus et al., 2020). Mental screening, which is another role of the professional school counselor, could also be done to assess risk for depression and mental illness amongst staff and students (Erickson & Abel, 2013). Additionally, professional school counselors should collaborate with other administrators, teachers, and parents to identify students exhibiting behavioral issues as a result of the pandemic. Lastly, professional school counselors assess and make appropriate referrals to other service agencies as this helps to ensure that students dealing with more clinical difficulties receive appropriate and holistic care for their needs.

Schools and districts pivoted their services to meet the unique challenges of schools during the pandemic (Limberg et al., 2022). Professional school counselors increased their collaboration with the school leadership team, teachers, and other professionals within their building, which may have helped teachers recognize the vital role of professional school counselors as leaders. Moreover, throughout the pandemic, professional school counselors were recognized for their expertise as mental health professionals and mental health was prioritized through the lens of leadership. All educators should continue to focus attention on the short-term and long-term mental health impact that the global health pandemic had and continues to have on students’ social/emotional needs keeping these non-academic factors at the forefront of the work they do.

As demands for mental health support increased during the pandemic, professional school counselors saw their role as essential to supporting students, especially given limited access to many local mental health providers (Alexander et al., 2022). Additionally, professional school counselors noted the deterioration of students’ mental health during the pandemic, largely due to the social isolation, anxiety, depression, grief, and trauma brought on by the pandemic. Furthermore, professional school counselors in communities with high infection rates described their heartbreaking experiences consoling students who lost family members to the virus. The pandemic has changed the way school leadership and professional school counselors offer

services to students, parents, and the community. Due to this, professional school counselors may find themselves focused on basic protective factors for students, specifically with positive peer relationships and feelings of connectedness (Chibbaro & Mecadon-Mann, 2021). These protective factors have been found to promote student well-being, prevent feelings of isolation or depression, and build feelings of connectedness. Professional school counselors must work with school leaders to identify students who may be suffering from the impacts of the pandemic. Additionally, parents, students, and community members may serve to help identify suffering students as professional school counselors are in an optimal position to offer interventions and strategies that may be helpful.

Professional school counselors' experiences during the pandemic showed that they faced unique barriers to enacting their roles, which largely originated from education leaders' focused attention on instructional issues and teachers. In some cases, professional school counselors received limited direction and guidance and were rarely asked for input in school planning, and in turn, their professional development needs went unmet (Savitz-Romer et al., 2021). Challenges caused educators to shift their use of time to conduct more non-counseling-related duties (Villares et al., 2022). Educators initially responded to the pandemic crisis with confusion and uncertainty. However, this was followed by collaboration and innovation, which is positive. In schools with strong leadership at the district level, school leaders were better able to collaborate and felt supported and respected for their efforts and this was further enhanced with support from professional school counselors (Strear et al., 2021).

Educational Opportunities During a Global Health Pandemic

The transition of educators to connect the delivery of online curriculum to the practical application of teaching and learning was a considerable challenge resulting in a number of unexpected outcomes during this disruptive time (Hughes et al., 2020). Educators had to improvise and devise quick solutions in less than ideal circumstances. No matter how innovative a solution might be, and as some very clever solutions continue to emerge, many educators will understandably continue to find this process stressful (Hodges et al., 2020). Educators have shown their ability quickly adapt to provide virtual learning and these efforts have been facilitated by increased collaboration amidst the recent global health pandemic. There has been a focus on the important work of all educators broadly, and a renewed focus has been placed on professional development to meet the ever-changing demands of districts and schools in our new norm. Regular communication with school leadership needs to occur to avoid underscoring the importance of constant bottom-up communications to ensure all perspectives are heard and included in decision-making processes at the administrative level (Chan et al., 2021).

Administrators need to be working to provide clear expectations by setting job boundaries and schedules at the district level. School leaders must concentrate on creating certainty by having clear rules and order at work and by ensuring that everyone feels included regarding decision-making (Orem, 2021). Administrators were noted as constantly providing updates to obtain feedback and facilitate decision-making. Moreover, these sessions not only facilitated the flow of information, but also allowed teachers to communicate with their colleagues, which was especially important in planning and delivering lessons, creating common assessments and assignments, and resolving emerging problems (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021). School leaders must remain focused on providing staff with more time to collaborate in building strong support systems (Fornaro et al., 2021).

School leaders stressed their efforts to address staff members' mental and emotional well-being. Given the rapidly changing flow of information, these school leaders increased the frequency of communication and provided students and families weekly updates through phone calls, video messages, and written newsletters (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021). Additionally, a significant percentage of teachers identified emotional support at the workplace from colleagues, administrators, students, and parents as an important source of positive job satisfaction for them during the pandemic (Chan et al., 2021).

Educational Challenges During a Global Health Pandemic

The global health pandemic brought many unforeseen challenges including delivering instruction online, troubleshooting students' inequitable internet access, and addressing families' food insecurity (Bishop, 2021). School leaders have noted the importance of caring for others by considering the school's and community's social, emotional, and mental well-being (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). At the start of the pandemic, school leaders experienced a significant decrease in self-confidence when transitioning from traditional settings to virtual learning (Hornor & Westberry, 2022). Given the rapid shift in classroom delivery mode caused by this health emergency and the constant changes of policies at varied levels, educators have experienced exceptionally high role ambiguity and uncertainty (Chan, 2021). Moreover, the importance of school leaders' impact on the school climate is noted such that "if a school district could invest in improving the performance of just one adult in a school building, investing in the principal is likely the most efficient way to affect student achievement" (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 40).

Of note, impoverished, rural school leaders underwent a greater decrease in confidence levels than urban school leaders (Hornor & Westberry, 2022). Additionally, school leaders with less experience noted higher decreases in confidence with the transition to virtual learning. During these challenging times school leaders understood the need to stay in close contact with families and their children to be able to determine where problems were arising with remote learning, as school leaders quickly realized some families had limited, inconsistent, or no access to technology and/or internet services (Okilwa & Barnett, 2021). Additionally, technology and internet access became central to achieving any success in the online learning platform, and a need for school districts to step in to provide electronic devices became critical. Agreement from all school leaders was around the need for additional professional development specific to technology and classroom management in an online environment (Fornaro et al., 2021). Furthermore, school leaders worked through wireless issues and provided laptops, headphones, and school supplies so students could engage with course material in this online environment (Fornaro et al., 2021).

School leaders understood that teachers repeatedly reported feeling emotionally exhausted and having high levels of stress (Chan, 2021). Teachers had to abruptly move to online education and had limited access to social support to combat the negative outcomes of experiencing stress as teachers experienced at least mild levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, during the fluctuating waves of the pandemic (Agyapong et al., 2021). School leadership witnessed firsthand how students' physical and mental health was being negatively affected by lengthy school closure and home confinement (Bishop, 2021). The impact on student achievement during this crisis was coupled with stressful non-academic factors such as health concerns, wellness declines, compromised safety of teachers, students, and their families in terms of care and support, financial strains, need for social and emotional support, and the decline of

physical and mental health, all causing uncertainty regarding the unknowns of this global health emergency (Hughes et al., 2020).

School leaders, teachers, and support personnel have seen a need to address the emotional well-being of educational stakeholders who are now apprehensive and fearful about the future of education (Netolicky, 2020). Furthermore, in a time of crisis, educators must act with foresight and careful consideration of opportunities and potential challenges. Additionally, the related consequences and side effects of the actions need to be accounted for with clear communication full of purpose, empathy, and humanity (Netolicky, 2020).

School leaders are working to combat teacher attrition, and if attrition rates were not already high in the United States before the pandemic, and without appropriate support for teachers, the teacher crisis is likely to exacerbate teacher shortages even further (Chan et al., 2021); important to note is that in addition to the teacher shortage, we are having an undeniable leadership shortage. Precipitating leadership vacancies, school leaders have noted high levels of discontent with their perceived lack of autonomy at the school level and have experienced increased burnout rates throughout the pandemic (Hornor & Westberry, 2022). Most importantly to note, the current disruption to education has educational systems considering the humanity of education, rather than its measurable outcomes and this shift is going to be directly related to the need to reshape education (Netolicky, 2020).

Educator's Needs in a Global Health Pandemic

There is a need to promote healing-centered engagement and mindfulness practices, which are critically important during a crisis when school leaders are faced with unprecedented difficulty and challenges in transitioning to online teaching and learning (Liu, 2020). These practices combat the work intensification, accountability, and burnout that is coupled with detriments within school leaders' physical, emotional, and mental well-being due to the added demands during this health crisis (Harris & Jones, 2022). To overcome these added demands, Hauseman et al. (2020) developed suggestions for the nature of effective professional learning to assist school leaders in navigating continued or similar crises in future areas of valuing everyone's contributions, establishing professional boundaries and modeling wellness, increasing flexibility, and spreading positivity.

There is a need for a strength-based approach to distributed leadership and valuing the unique skills and contributions of the individual staff members to assist school leaders facing a magnitude of demands and unpredictable challenges (Harris & Jones, 2022; Hauseman et al., 2020). With the increased access to communication through online platforms, professional development is encouraged to endorse wellness and skills to establish professional boundaries with school leaders modeling a positive work-life balance for staff and students to promote self-care (Hauseman et al., 2020).

Educator's Growth in a Global Health Pandemic

While it is undeniable that school leaders faced various challenges throughout the course of the pandemic, they also noted growth in their leadership practices. Areas where school leaders perceived growth due to the pandemic include "increased time on instructional leadership practices, intentionality in data analyses, and increased collective self-efficacy" (Hornor & Westberry, 2022, p. 24). Comparatively, school leaders who relied on collective wisdom and networking with colleagues across geographical regions, especially within areas where the pandemic had impact earlier on and more intensely, were at a greater advantage for planning and response (McLeod & Dulsky, 2021). Additionally, there was a spike in resilience across

educators and school leaders attributed to individual and organizational risk-taking. To understand the real influence of a crisis event, 12–24 months after the onset of a crisis seems to be a useful time to start to review what happened (Mutch, 2015), thus suggesting the importance and relevance of conducting continued research around the impact of the recent global health pandemic.

Methodology

Research Design

The researchers utilized Photovoice, an action research methodology for this study, to give voice to community members who may not have a voice or needed a more powerful voice, and in the case of this research, needed a voice in a challenging time (Wang & Burris, 1997). Additionally, in photovoice, the participants themselves select images as a part of a process referred to as *reflexive photography* as the images then act as the stimulus to guide further discussion. Some may argue that school leaders do, in fact, have access as a change agent and, by nature of being in a leadership role, have a voice. Participants were instructed to not take photographs of themselves, of students in classrooms, or anything that may identify them or their district or school. Participants were instructed to take original photos of objects, spaces, and or images, and to use the photographs as a metaphor for their experiences. Photovoice was selected to encourage participants to highlight strengths and opportunities in their schools, as well as capture representations, positive or negative, of what it is like leading in a pandemic. By utilizing photovoice, the intention was to ensure a rich set of data with both photographs gathered and the analysis of the focus group discussions, as well as elicit data to gather knowledge and information from the voice of school leaders that included professional school counselors working in a pandemic.

Participants were recruited through an alumni email distribution list. Participants were in the southeastern United States. School modes of teaching included Face-to-Face (F2F), Online, and Hybrid, with Hybrid indicating participants experienced both F2F and Online formats. Eleven participants, seven school leaders and four professional school counselors participated in the study; nine identified as female and two identified as male. One of those participants identified themselves as of Hispanic origin and 10 identified themselves as White. The school leaders and professional school counselors' years of experience ranged between one year to twenty-one years. Participants were provided informed consent outlining the purpose of the study, participation criteria, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, the significance of the study, information regarding the format and recording of the focus groups, and the option to withdraw free of penalty from the study at any time.

Data Collection

The participants were instructed to take original photographs that represented their experiences leading their schools during the pandemic. They were then asked to select between three to five photographs that they believed best represented their experiences leading during the pandemic. After each participant selected their photographs, they were invited to a virtual focus group. The participants shared these photos through screen sharing during the focus group; the meeting was recorded, and photographs were uploaded to a protected file folder to which only the researchers had access. The focus group lasted one and a half hours and was dedicated to the participants taking turns sharing their photographs and their rationale for selecting the photograph. The guiding focus group question was, "How do the photographs represent your

experiences during the health pandemic?” The ‘SHOWeD’ reflection model was used to guide the focus group discussions (Powers et al., 2012). Before describing their photograph, the researcher asked other participants to describe what they saw in each photo, and the participants described not only what was physically visible in the photograph, but also voiced inferences they could make about the photograph. This answered the question: What do you **See** here? After the discussion, the photographer then explained the intentionality behind the photograph, leading to the prompt: What is Happening here? Then the photographer shared what the photo shows about their experiences leading in the pandemic, specifically, answering the prompts: How does this relate to **Our** lives? As well as the prompt: Why does this problem **exist**? The participants then considered the prompt: What can we **Do** about it? An Interview protocol guided the attainment of informed consent and directed the questioning process. See Appendix A.

Data Analysis and Findings

The recording was transcribed verbatim, and the researchers were responsible for completing data analysis by codifying the results based on reoccurring themes and patterns noted in the responses. As with any participatory action research, the participants helped drive the analysis through their photographs and discussion as the selection and contextualization of the photographs were completed by the participants (Wang, 2006). Use of photovoice includes a reflection process that has a three-phase method to include selecting, contextualizing, and codifying photographs (Wang, 2006). The researchers utilized an adaptation of Wang’s (2006) three-stage process to accommodate the collective, reflective dialogue by developing a “U-heuristic” model, which allows for collective contextualizing, codifying, and photo selection. Using this heuristic for data analysis, individual experiences and themes from our participants were able to be shared, which “resulted in collective themes emerging from the data through the subsequent dialogue of each participant’s individual story” (Koltz et al., 2010, p. 393).

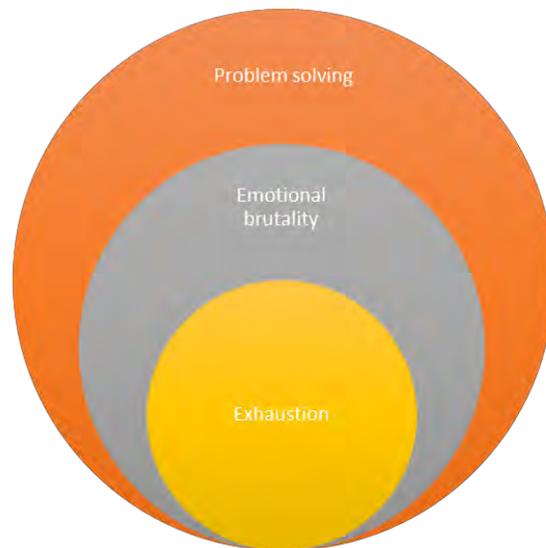
The researchers collaborated to determine overarching themes and the findings led them to three areas of focus as noted in the findings. From there codes for each of the themes were used to categorize the statements about the photographs into *buckets* for further analysis. The researchers presented the findings as three themes and rather than show individual photographs, they selected an overall depiction that represented the three overarching themes. U-heuristic was developed to visually depict the data analysis process that they engaged in to select photographs. To ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researchers employed credibility (prolonged interaction with the data, as well as triangulation of the data), dependability using an audit trail, and reflectivity in the form of individual field notes and journal entries. Duncan (2004) stressed the importance of keeping a reflective journal and other forms of data (e.g., coding notes) to support reliability, in accordance with suggestions made by Yin (1989). Writing memos should begin with the session during data analysis and continue throughout the analytic process (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). We each kept our own field notes that included individual journals to reflect on our journey and track personal experiences as well we each wrote memos that detailed our coding and data analyses.

Data analysis produced three overarching themes that were developed and identified by analyzing the transcripts and participant photographs obtained during the data collection process in the focus groups. The collective findings answered the research question: What have been school leaders and school counselors' professional and emotional experiences around working with teachers and student well-being during this global health pandemic? Participant photos and quotes were chosen as thematic representations to help more fully describe their experiences.

The three overarching themes identified from the data were: *Problem solving*; *emotional brutality*; and *exhaustion*. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

Collective Themes of Educator Experiences



When conceptualizing the major themes, it was important to see how the themes interacted with each other, and what the importance was of each theme in relation to the others. The graphic also helps illustrate the order in which participants experienced the theme, for example, at the start of the pandemic, participants stated their focus was on problem solving, which then shifted to a sense of emotional brutality, which then led to feelings of exhaustion. The graphic above shows how the three themes are connected to each other and how each theme leads to the other. The participants stated the importance of each of these themes, and how at the core of their experience was an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. In the graphic, the largest, orange circle is the first, primary theme, *problem solving*. The large orange circle has two smaller circles inside of them. The medium sized circle is gray in color and depicts *emotional brutality*. The final, smallest circle is yellow in color and the words inside the circle read *exhaustion*.

Overarching Theme 1: Problem Solving

Problem solving, for the participants involved in this study, identified problem solving as the ability to identify individual and systemic challenges and determine and implement solutions. The school leaders and professional school counselors overly identified with the theme of problem solving, stating that they were problem solvers. The participants in some ways identified their ability to problem solve as a positive and needed character trait; problem solving is a part of who they innately are.

Participant 1 stated:

“...we’re natural fixers in this profession. That’s challenging, internally, because like (participant) said, we don’t know how to fix this and that has been really hard- not having an answer.”

Participant 2 further elaborated:

“I feel like they’re (students) not being allowed to just be in kindergarten. They’re (students) in kindergarten and having to bear the weight of an entire global pandemic at the same time and they have no idea they’re doing that. It’s just their life.”

Problem solving was a theme identified by participants and illustrated by the following photograph:

Figure 2

The Theme of Problem Solving



The photograph is of a child’s dollhouse. The dollhouse has a blue checkered floor with a brown, wooden edge and a blue and white pinstriped wall. In the dollhouse are two figurines— both figurines look like male children. The childlike figurines are placed in a standing position at the foot end of a figurine of bed. The bed figurine has a red checkered blanket. There is a brown wooden table and lamp figurine and a small bureau figurine in the photograph as well.

This photograph was selected because, as Participant 4 stated, “Oftentimes, it’s just a snapshot of a home life kind of thing. For some students, I think it’s very- it’s a warm and nurturing place. For some of the students, it’s a really rough place, and school is their safe place... if things aren’t going okay at home, it’s hard to focus and learn. And there is nothing we could have done about that.”

These school leaders and professional school counselors spoke passionately about their natural ability to “fix” things and mitigate any and all problems within their schools. At the start of the pandemic, the school leaders and professional school counselors shared how they felt their ability to problem solve was a significant help; participants stated they also recognized their inability to solve many of the problems caused by the pandemic. Participant 5 stated, “It (the years of the pandemic) was probably the hardest time in my professional career because, you know, I’m a fixer and I couldn’t fix this.”

The inability of these problem solvers to be unable to mitigate the challenges faced by students, faculty, staff, and families created deep emotional rifts. Participant 5 highlighted the incongruence of how they experienced themselves pre and post-pandemic: “We think that because someone has a doctoral degree, or somebody comes out of a teacher ed program, like, ‘Wow. They know how to regulate their emotions and deal with stress properly,’ and that is 110

percent false. And I am living proof of that.” The inability to solve these problems led to emotional brutality.

Overarching Theme 2: Emotional Brutality

Emotional brutality, in this context, is defined as deep emotions leading to difficulty, confusion, and pain. Within this sense of emotional brutality is also a significant sense of helplessness and feeling as if they are to blame. Participants described the painful emotions as well as feeling like the receptacle of other people’s pain, anger, and distrust. School leaders stated repeatedly their desire to help, but also their struggle with the inability to change systems. School leaders described feeling like they were “fall guy” for the many interrelated issues facing our society in the midst of the global pandemic.

One participant described emotional brutality in this way-
Participant 3 stated:

“School is like many organizations. It was about community, and then about this fractured community because of all of these procedures and operations and mandates and the masks. It focused so much on all of these rules for public health, for contact tracing. It was an unprecedented level of stress I had never experienced. But working during COVID during this time, and then if a kid got COVID, and then you had to do the contact tracing on where they sat on the bus, who they came in contact within the lunchroom, who they came in contact within their classroom, and then you had to call all of the parents. I mean, it was- people were afraid and they were mad. Again- back to that broken community. Like I would just, because of all of the feelings and the fear, sometimes I would just let parents yell at me on the phone because I just didn’t- like they just needed to be heard and that was how target were expressing their fear, so I just let them. It was so much broken community. It was tough.”

Participant 5 further elaborated: “I did not handle it (the pandemic) well at all. I did the best I could, and I told people I understood. The good news is school is changed forever and the bad news is school is changed forever. The problem is nobody told us how to grieve that world, that shift, that paradigm shift of what we knew school to be. The first stage of grief is anger. Educators, leaders, we were shock absorbers for that anger.”

In addition to feeling as if they were targeted by members of the public, participants also spoke about the feelings of sadness and anger they felt. Feelings of sadness came up for the participants in regard to faculty, staff, families, but most importantly for the students.

Participant 2 stated: “The only way I know how to describe how I felt was just sad. I was just sad because you’re supposed to be reading Chicka Chicka Boom Boom and learning how to identify letter sounds... I don’t know. I don’t know. That just makes me feel sad for them.”

Participant 6 further elaborated: “...school is all about, ‘Hey. Get up close. Let’s talk.’ ‘What’d you do today?’ ‘What are you doing this afternoon?’ And that all went away. You know? The littles in my school don’t know that kind of fun. That socializing... even in the lunchroom, you know, we had two chairs in between each child, so they couldn’t sit right next to one another... it’s just heartbreaking.”

Participant 7 brought up the increasing amount of anger they felt. Participant 7 stated: “This might be a little extreme, but I feel like that a lot of our kids had a huge part of their childhood stolen. You know? They will never experience some of the things that you or I or others experienced when we were their age. Their life has changed forever. And it makes me kinda angry.”

Figure 3

The Theme of Emotional Brutality



The photograph selected to best represent the theme of emotional brutality is a framed movie poster from the Disney Pixar film, “Inside Out.” The photograph shows the words inside out in blue and red, with an outline of a young, female child’s profile. Inside the child’s profile are five cartoon characters illustrating emotions. The illustrated emotions are joy, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust. In the bottom right corner of the photograph are the words, “Every day is full of emotions.”

Problem solving and emotional brutality fed into the final theme, exhaustion. Participants acknowledged their inability to continue operating at the same frenetic level they did prior to the pandemic. After the significant mental and physical energy expended, our educational leaders and professional school counselors experienced exhaustion.

Overarching Theme 3: Exhaustion

The final overarching theme generated from the school leaders and professional school counselors’ responses involving their lived experiences during the pandemic indicated exhaustion. Exhaustion for these participants encompassed both physical and mental aspects of fatigue. The intersection of stress and fatigue created the mental and physical exhaustion created by the overwhelm of the pandemic. Participants described feeling as if they were at their breaking point.

Participant 2 stated: “I think through the pandemic... it brings up those ‘Teachers are heroes. Yes. We need to be happy for teachers and encourage teachers.’ Then- just the further we got into it (the pandemic), the more it was like, ‘Okay, but why haven’t you sent my child’s report card yet? Okay, but why aren’t you picking up my phone call at 10:30 at night when I’m calling you because I feel entitled to have 24/7 access to you now?’ It brings up those feelings of, at some point, it stopped feeling like a hero's super power, and it started feeling just really, really exhausting”.

Participant 1 further explained: “Everybody’s stressed out, so just the exhaustion. I relate, definitely to the exhaustion, the too many hours, the 8, 10, 12 hours, the 50 hour weeks, the 60

hour weeks, 12 hour days, and always feeling like you're never going to catch up, you're never-it's never done."

The photograph represented to highlight the theme of exhaustion is of a clear, empty Mason jar. The jar is on a beige, flat surface, and the wall behind the jar also has a shadow of the empty jar. Participant 1 stated: "... there have been days where I felt very, very empty of just constantly giving all the time and having to prioritize self care for myself."

Figure 4

The Theme of Exhaustion



Each of the three themes are independent yet are also interconnected as one theme feeds into the next and the next. The core of these themes is exhaustion. At first, the participants acknowledged the importance of problem solving and quickly discovered their inability to "solve" these pandemic problems. Then participants experienced emotional brutality—essentially feeling as if they were the "punching bag" for all that was wrong with education and the pandemic. Finally, the participants accepted the exhaustion they felt. Participants contributed valuable recommendations that are further addressed in the discussion of the findings.

Discussion

Three overarching themes were established from focus groups. Information presented by the participants regarding these identified themes attended to the research question addressed in this study. The three overarching themes identified from the focus group data were: *problem solving*, *emotional brutality*, and *exhaustion*. These themes were supported by interview data as well as original participant photographs.

There are limitations and strengths to all research projects, and this was no exception. Our findings illustrate challenges inherent in our educational system and the lack of support by community leaders. While it was easy connecting with the school leaders and professional school counselors, it was quite challenging to schedule focus group time. The researchers were cognizant of the differing roles and responsibilities of the participants, and it became clear that there could have been many more participants, however, scheduling limited our access. Photovoice and focus groups can be quite time intensive, and that can be seen as a limitation. A strength of this study was the vulnerability and honesty of the participants. Participants were willing to provide rich, detailed descriptions of their personal and work lives throughout the pandemic. Through their vulnerability and honesty, the researchers were able to help amplify their voices and experiences.

The pandemic pushed school leaders and professional school counselors to turn to virtual tools to engage with and track students and families. School leaders and professional school counselors recognized the promise of specific technological tools, which many professional school counselors believe will continue to enhance their work after the pandemic in our new norm. However, they also offered some caution about technology use beyond the visible inequities that access to technology makes apparent. During the pandemic, professional school counselors were relieved of activities that took them away from their expertise in providing comprehensive mental health services to students and families. Given the health pandemic, there was even further need to provide a combination of comprehensive social–emotional learning support and academic and career counseling services to students. School leaders and professional school counselors conducted wellness checks on students and families and the importance of community partners who provided support to families in need.

The pandemic forced districts and schools to examine their policies and practices through the lens of student needs as we have indeed entered a new phase of leading our schools. This new norm is a result of the disrupted practices we faced that need a shift in how we conduct everyday business. School leaders and professional school counselors acknowledged the toll that the pandemic has had on the social and emotional health not only of students, but of adults as well, including parents, guardians, and school staff. School leadership was critical in providing a variety of ongoing support for school staff as well as students to navigate this new normal. When schools across the country began to close in response to the pandemic, feelings of disbelief were reported. Many spoke of this period of time as chaotic and overwhelming as they navigated the immediate impact that school closures would have on students and families.

As national-, state-, and district-level leadership organized their efforts to ensure that educators had access to needed resources to meet students' and families' basic needs (e.g., food, housing), wellness (e.g., mental health services), and the utilization of technology (Wi-Fi, Internet access). It was clear that districts and schools were committed to maintaining connections with students to support their holistic well-being. Educators reported that they had time to conduct proactive activities and noted that school leaders were beginning to acknowledge the leadership expertise of support personnel and tap into their skillset to provide resources to support students and their families. Gone are the days of doing business as usual, as mental health and well-being have played a major role as we make a concerted effort to support both the academic and non-academic growth of our students and their families as well as our school leaders, teachers, and support staff.

Conclusion

School leaders have a vital role to play in the support of teachers and their developmental process, especially during the increasing demands of a global health pandemic. Although it can be assumed all areas of school personnel are experiencing additional hardships from the pandemic, it is encouraged for school leaders and professional school counselors to evaluate the current level of support they have been given and identify any areas needed for professional and emotional growth. Engaging in conversations about additional emotional strains being faced by teachers and support staff and their specific needs was of high importance to participants. It is encouraged for school leaders and professional school counselors to develop effective and open feedback systems for teachers and support staff to have an open discussion of concerns they may be experiencing within their classroom and/or with online/hybrid learning. These open discussions can lead to the implementation of new guidelines or expectations and increase

awareness of necessary resources to ensure effective teaching and learning during the new norm we have found ourselves in following a global health pandemic.

It is the goal that future research will engage in additional focus groups and photovoice studies to better understand the experiences of educators currently charged with teaching and learning during and after a health crisis including school leaders and professional school counselors as well as their support staff including teachers, and students. Assessing the influences of the pandemic may provide more insight into the emotional well-being of those on the front line in the reshaping of education as our new norm. Additionally, it would be informative for future research to evaluate potential shifts in the professional and emotional experiences of all educators post-COVID-19. Specifically, researchers could uncover any additional opportunities and challenges that may come for themselves or students in yet again having to reevaluate and establish a new sense of normalcy. So, the question remains is this a new normal, the researchers would argue adamantly that it is indeed our new norm.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent / Interview Protocol Questions

Informed Consent:

“Reminders around confidentiality- we will keep things confidential— we cannot control others though. You can withdraw at any time, you can also choose to not share anything. If you start feeling discomfort or stress around this project, please let any one of the researchers know and we will be able to connect you with mental health resources.”

Don't forget to make sure you get verbal or hand gestures for confidentiality and recording***

If you are willing, please share your name or pseudonym and your current role (teacher, grade level). Also, please share your current teaching location (online, in person, hybrid). You may also use a pseudonym if you would feel more comfortable.

This focus group will be exploring your thoughts and feelings about teaching during the pandemic. We will be asking you to share the photographs you have taken and tell us why you selected certain photographs to share. Also remember, the photographs serve as metaphors for your experience, and you should not have pictures of any people for this focus group.

We will ask someone to share their picture and then the others make comments about what they see- then the photographer shares why they took the picture.

We will start off by asking you to show a picture(s) that answers the questions:

How has leading been different for you since COVID-19?

How has leading been the same for you since the COVID-19 pandemic?”

Other open ended questions may include:

Tell me more about your photograph- what were your thoughts and feelings as you took the photograph and the thoughts and feelings you have now.

What thoughts and feelings are other participants experiencing while looking at this photograph?

Why did you choose to share this photograph?

Other questions may arise during the focus group; these questions will be open-ended. These will be semi-structured interviews.